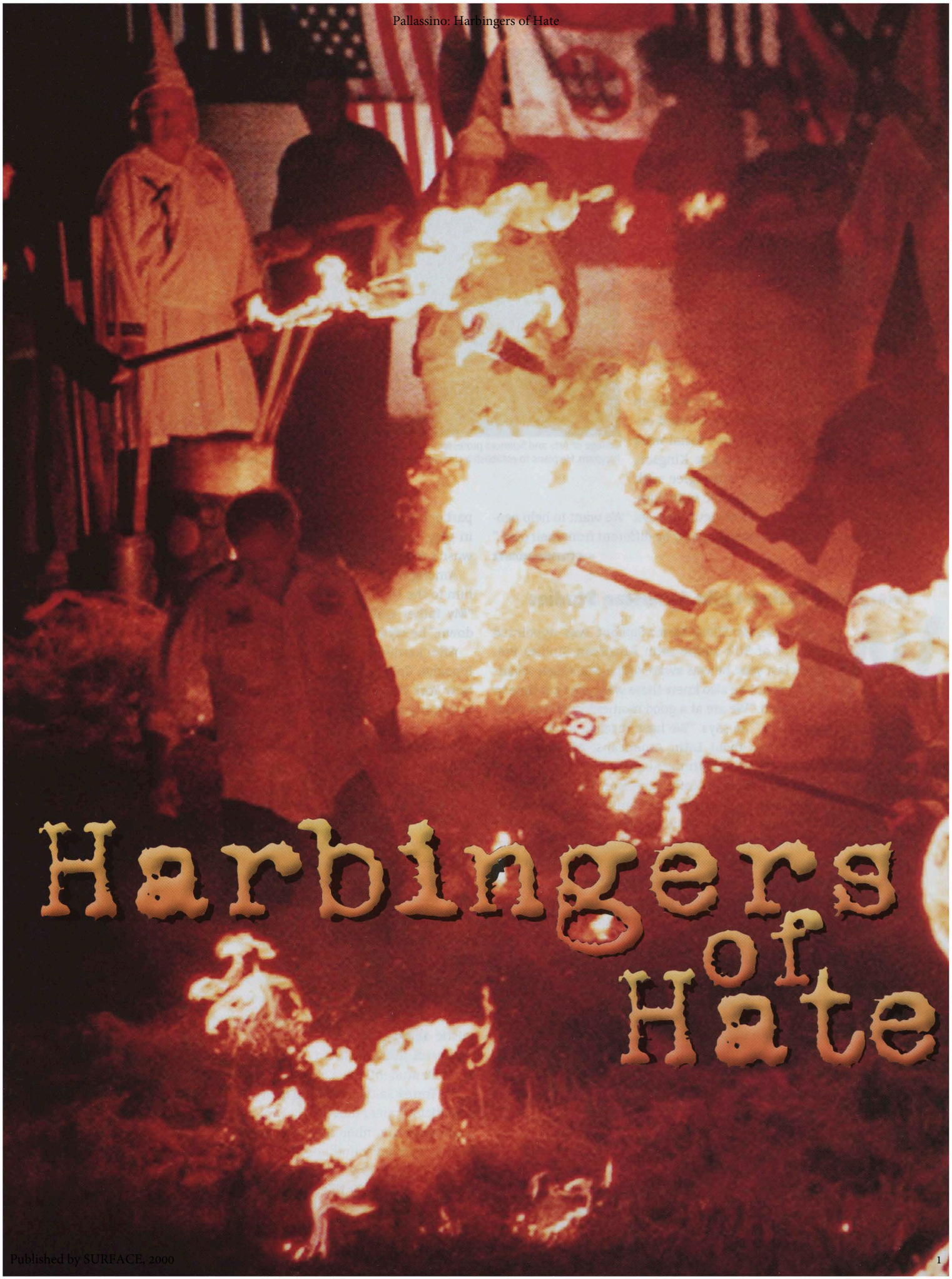
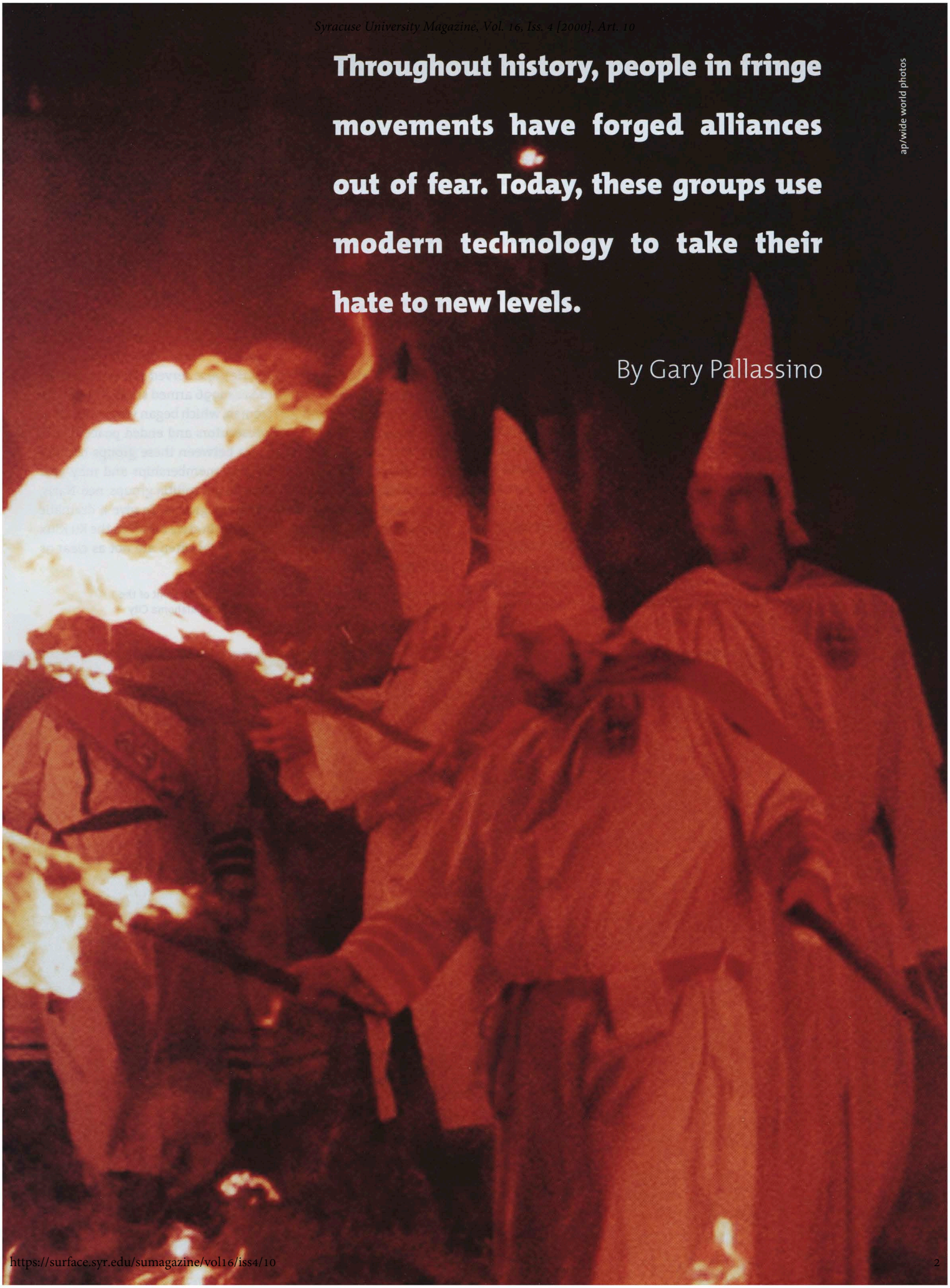


Harbingers of Hate

Throughout history, people in fringe movements have forged alliances out of fear. Today, these groups use modern technology to take their hate to new levels.

By Gary Pallassino



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By its very nature, a country built on the free exchange of ideas is bound to have citizens whose views differ radically from those of the mainstream. The Internet abounds with sites created by so-called "hate groups," extreme right-wingers boiling over with racist rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and anti-government tirades. But what turns a difference of opinion into an act such as the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City? "Nobody says, 'We're a hate group, we hate people,'" notes Professor Gary Spencer, chair of the sociology department at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and the College of Arts and Sciences, who researches prejudice and discrimination, particularly as manifested on the Internet. "They believe there's a threat to the values they hold dear. They see themselves as patriots, religious believers, and good citizens who are being threatened by these outside forces and feel they have to do something about it."

The popularity of the television program *The X-Files,* which is built on the premise of a government conspiracy, shows how compelling such ideas can become, says Michael Barkun, a political science professor at the Maxwell School and the College of Arts and Sciences whose research interests include right-wing extremist groups. "Many of these conspiracy beliefs originate on the extreme right, but they can now be found in all sorts of places, in front of tens of millions of people," he says. "I think one factor behind these beliefs is the end of the Cold War, in the sense that we had a clear enemy and it's not there anymore. In a way, it was unpleasant to have an enemy. On the other hand, it was reassuring, because for many people there was a clear distinction between the forces of good and evil, and that's disappeared. The kinds of conspiracy theories that crop up now are ways of making sense of the world. In part, they're replacements for the role the Soviet Union used to play."

Barkun says changes in the nature of communications make ideas once relegated to small and obscure groups widely accessible. "A lot of the weirder themes that show up on *The X-Files* made earlier appearances on the Internet," he says. "So the kind of sharp line that once existed between what might be called the fringe and what might be called the mainstream has blurred considerably."

Facing Fear

Barkun, whose work includes research on religion and politics and such books as *Religion and the Racist Right,* studies a variety of radical right-wing groups. He's also served as a consultant to the FBI, notably during the bureau's 1996 armed standoff with the anti-government Montana Freemen, which began when the group threatened local judges and prosecutors and ended peacefully 81 days later. "It's hard to draw lines between these groups because very often they'll have overlapping memberships and may well share some beliefs," he says. "You've got militia groups, neo-Nazis, tax protest groups, Christian Identity groups. To give a dramatic example, there are certain differences in style between the Ku Klux Klan and skinheads, but the differences often are not as clear as some people think."

Heavy equipment is used to remove debris from the front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City following the April 19, 1995, bombing.

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Hundreds of bodies are strewn around the Jonestown commune in Jonestown, Guyana, where more than 900 members of the People's Temple committed suicide in November 1978. The Rev. Jim Jones, the group's leader—who urged his disciples to drink cyanide-laced grape punch—was among the dead.

But Barkun's interests lie mainly with millennial movements—groups of people who anticipate a sudden and total transformation of the world in connection with the new millennium. Barkun has studied these groups for more than 30 years. "Most millennialists tend to believe this final consummation—when history ends—will be preceded by a final struggle between good and evil," he says. "This has most frequently been symbolized by the battle of Armageddon."

The concept was originally Christian, he says, appearing only in the *New Testament*. But the idea of a climactic battle between good and evil is common in millenarian thought throughout the world. "Millennialists usually draw sharp distinctions between good and evil, between the forces of light and darkness. They see the climax of history as a point where the forces of light finally defeat the forces of darkness, and everything will be perfect after that."

Despite the images of a violent end, Barkun notes that the vast majority of millennialists are law abiding and nonviolent. "There are millennialists who have been completely passive," he says. "That is, they've taken the view that God, or the forces of history, or whatever mechanism is supposed to be moving this process along, will make these things happen through some kind of inevitability or superior force that is part of God's plan. Therefore the individual doesn't have to do anything except wait for it to happen. But others believe they have a role to play in this struggle. With them, there is the potential for confrontation."

Over the last 20 years, a number of groups with millenarian beliefs have been involved in acts of violence. Most publicized were the 1978 mass suicide of People's Temple members in Jonestown, Guyana; the deadly 1993 armed standoff with the strongly millennialist Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas; and the 1997 mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate group in San Diego. The most recent was in March, when more than 600 people were burned alive in the church of Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda. Bodies of murdered church members have since been dug up at other sites, bringing the death toll to more than 1,000. Barkun also mentions the group Aum Shinrikyo, which killed five people in 1995 with a nerve gas attack in the Tokyo subway. "Their millennialism was a rather strange mix of Buddhism, Christianity, Nostradamus, and a lot of other ingredients," he says. "Many times when violence is involved, it occurs because a group believes it is being threatened from the outside, or the violence may be directed at its own members, as in the case of mass suicides. Aum Shinrikyo was unusual in that it was a first user of violence and directed the violence at a random population."

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Bearing an inverted flag as a protest, Bill Goehler of Marysville, California, rode his motorcycle to Jordan, Montana, in 1996 to show support for the Freemen, an anti-government group.

As 2000 approached, concerns over the possibility of violence extended to federal law enforcement officials. A 1999 FBI report called *Project Megiddo* concluded that specific acts of millennium-related violence were impossible to predict. As it turned out, no major incidents materialized. Barkun says anyone planning to help bring about the end of history may have chosen to wait until law enforcement officials were not as vigilant, but adds that expectations of the millennium don't necessarily center around a year with three zeroes. "The feeling was, if it was a millennial year, people who anticipate a total transformation of society would focus on that particular year rather than others. And that simply isn't the case. That said, I think there will continue to be a certain amount of anxiety about these issues for quite a while, because there are a large number of groups that build their belief systems around other dates between now and roughly 2020. So there's no reason to assume that this will disappear." Barkun notes that law enforcement officials and the public are right to be concerned about the greater tendency to find potentially violent groups built around religious beliefs rather than secular political ideologies. "The potential role of religion and therefore doctrines of sudden millennial change are real," he says. "And they're not necessarily built around the year 2000."

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Jannie Coverdale displays portraits of her slain grandsons, Arron and Elijah, as she stands near the site of the former Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The boys were killed in the April 19, 1995, terrorist bombing of the building.

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Studying Hate

History professor David H. Bennett traces America's hate groups to the country's colonial days, when American Catholics faced intense hostility under the nativism of the Protestant majority. He notes that the best-selling book in America at the time was a thin volume with the unwieldy title *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Sufferings During a Residence of Five Years as a Novice and Two Years as a Black Nun in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal.* The book, which sold more than 300,000 copies, recounted the alleged story of a Protestant girl captured by a vicious mother superior and subjected to horrible abuse. "Even though there were only 35,000 Catholics in the entire country at the time of the Revolution, there was a pandemic fear of them," says Bennett, a Maxwell School and College of Arts and Sciences professor whose 1995 book, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History,* recounts a history of hate.

Nativism—intense opposition to a minority on the grounds of its alleged un-American characteristics—persisted with each new wave of immigration, Bennett says, finally dying out in the 1930s. His book traces right-wing movements through the rise and fall of the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War; the Red Scare of the twenties and the KKK's short-lived rebirth as the Great Klan; the beginning of anti-Communism in the late forties and the rise of the American Nazi Party, Klan fragments, and other groups targeting various minorities in the fifties and sixties; the birth of the Christian Identity movement; and the rise of present-day militia groups. "All of these are hate groups," Bennett says. "They all fear certain people they consider un-American."

Sociology professor Spencer examines what he calls "the sociology of evil"—how these groups come together, and ways in which they define entire categories of people to exclude them from their "moral community." "Of course they don't see themselves as joining a hate group," he says. "They see themselves as joining a moral community. They're patriots, true believers in the revealed word of God, and they have to view the people who don't share those values, beliefs, and behaviors as somehow unworthy of the dignity they afford their own people. Those people have to be made to look immoral and, in extreme cases, less than fully human."

While one might tend to consider extremists as ignorant or mentally disturbed, Spencer prefers a different approach. "I'm interested in the social process by which these individuals find one another

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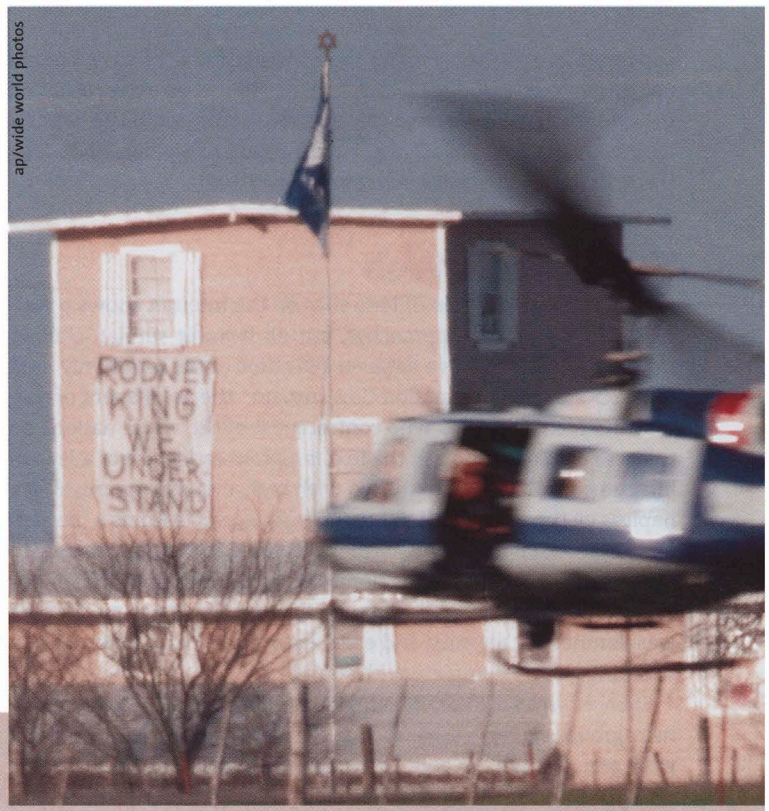
and organize themselves in a group or co-activity," he says. "There are patterns to how they communicate and establish symbols and rituals that reinforce their belief system and oneness. As a general sociological principle, rituals that reinforce your oneness with a group draw boundaries around who is a member of that group. One of the ways you draw boundaries is to identify who belongs to other groups, and in a sense they become the enemy or the threat that now binds a group together."

While each group he studies has its own characteristics, Spencer says the groups as a whole share some basic similarities that help in understanding them. "Frequently there's a charismatic leader or founder who speaks eloquently about a threat and its danger, and he or she will often have a relatively small group of hardcore believers who devote a great deal of time and effort to organizing, writing, or putting up web sites. And then there is a wider, larger ring that's much more permeable—people come in and out of the organization and at some particular time have a fairly strong involvement in it." Membership ebbs and flows according to such phenomena as economic downturns and upswings. Political social movements—which seem to embody the perceived threat against the group—may also boost the group's ranks. As an example, Spencer cites contemporary movements devoted to mainstreaming the notion of homosexuality as simply another form of sexual orientation. "These movements are saying you ought to recognize that people who have homosexual orientations are very good citizens, act with dignity, and treat other people with dignity—but this then becomes a great threat to the belief system of the anti-homosexual group. This group's members see homosexuality as a perversion, legitimize their view in Scripture, and view these people as less than fully human, and totally lacking in and undeserving of dignity. Laws specifically protecting the rights of gays and lesbians would be another example to these groups of how they have to find each other and try to fight what they see as a pattern of changes taking place in society that are immoral, dangerous, and threaten them and their civilization. Enacting such laws offers them a chance, and indeed a need, to organize."

Spencer has found that, quite often, the degree to which people



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A Texas Department of Public Safety helicopter buzzes past the Mount Carmel Branch Davidian compound on March 27, 1993, near Waco, Texas.

Flames engulf the Branch Davidian compound on April 19, 1993. Eighty-one Davidians, including leader David Koresh, perished as federal agents tried to drive them out of the compound.

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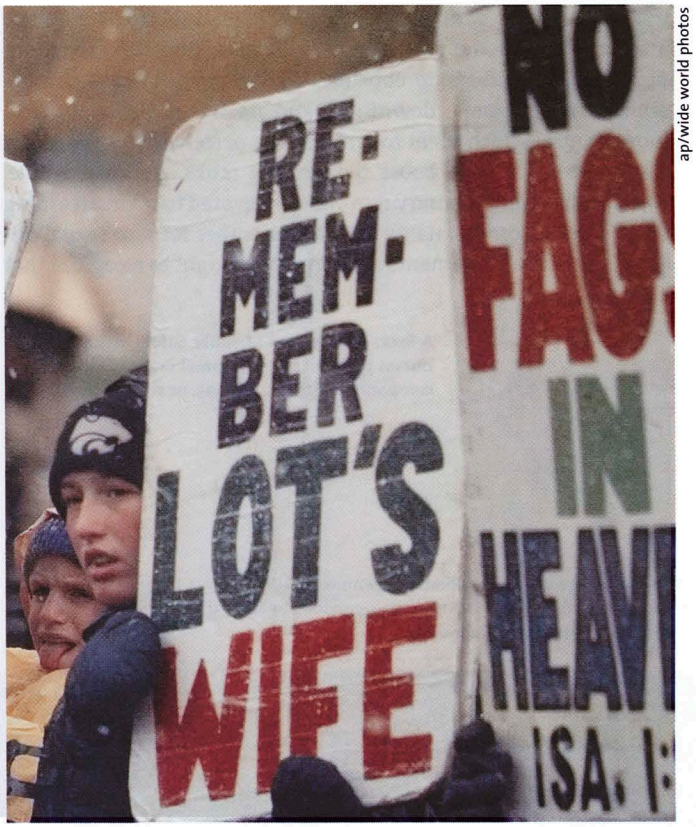
A member of the American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan participates in a demonstration in Marion, Indiana, in November 1995. About 300 spectators, 32 Klan members, and 160 law enforcement officials attended the rally.



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Anti-gay protesters express their views at the funeral of Matthew Shepard in Casper, Wyoming, on October 16, 1998. Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student, was beaten to death.

perceive these threats matches their feeling that they have a moral obligation to do something about them. "To use an extreme, if you believe certain people are vermin and civilization would be better if they were destroyed, now you have a moral obligation to destroy them. In its simplicity, it's incredibly powerful."

Hate on the Web

Spencer's examination of hate sites on the Internet shows a variety of styles and approaches, but all bearing similar, chilling messages. One provides a detailed definition of the commonly used term ZOG: Zionist Occupation Government, "the assortment of traitors and Zionist lackeys who control most of the white nations on this planet." Provided with the text is a gross caricature of a Jewish businessman, his pockets stuffed with cash, moneybags crushing a hapless victim. Another, *www.godhatesfags.com,* features a "perpetual gospel memorial" to Matthew Shepard, who was beaten to death in 1998 because of his homosexuality. Despite the "memorial" title, the page is an attack on homosexuality, claiming Shepard was damned for eternity, and even featuring an illustration of him suffering there—complete with sound.

Spencer sees an emerging amalgamation of previously disparate hate groups, in part because the Internet has put them in touch with one another. "When everybody's available out there on the web, your stories, threats, and legitimizations get out there, and you start to see, 'Yeah we agree with this too.' To some degree, whether you go to a white supremacist or anti-Semitic site, over time the groups find their common ground." Seeing a fairly consistent pattern in these hateful beliefs is frightening, Spencer says. "The general pattern goes something like this: The superior race of the world is the white race, which emerged out of a combination of Nordic and Anglo-Saxon European peoples. They are, in fact, the true chosen people of God, and God is a Christian god, and the way of life of this superior racial group is under attack. People who are white and Christian and, to some degree, of European-Anglo descent, have to understand that there's this worldwide conspiracy that threatens their way of life. And the primary orchestrators of this threat are the Jews." Numerous sites provide "evidence" of this conspiracy, pointing out the number of Jewish people controlling world governments, the military, economic systems, and the media.

Spencer says the Internet provides an unprecedented medium for people to share beliefs and values. "You can take any belief system you want and find chat rooms for it on the Internet," he says. "You can find rooms where people who love dogs reinforce that dogs are the most wonderful things in the world. These people

know each other by first name. When somebody says I had to put so-and-so to sleep, they all cry about it. And they will talk and worry about regulations that round up dogs and put them to sleep. There probably aren't a whole lot of reasons for us to go out and study dog lovers in chat rooms, but when you see people who are saying, 'The enemy is the government....'"

The Internet does for the general public, Spencer says, what it also does for hate groups: opens the world for an exchange of ideas. "We can find people who share our belief systems and what's important to us. And to the extent that we find them on the Internet, it reinforces who we are and what we believe. That's the general process by which everybody learns and reinforces who they are. We find and interact with groups of people who tend to share those beliefs. That gives us a peer group to interact with, so if we share our beliefs and realities, they must be true and must be real, because we are interacting with people who reinforce them. People who don't feel that way get defined as an out group and you push them off to the side."

Similarly minded people can find each other through web sites, then meet in chat rooms to discuss their views. "And lo and behold, people in England, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, and Canada say, 'Yes, that's true here, too,'" Spencer says. "So then you have them in contact with one another. Think how wonderful it is to anyone, to bathe yourself with people all over the world who believe in the same things. It becomes a kind of ritual that makes you feel a part of something larger than yourself, feel important. You're doing something righteous, something morally good, and you're finding these other righteous people. The Internet just opens up that opportunity in the extreme. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say the Internet is as revolutionary as the Gutenberg press."

Making Sense of the Senseless

Incidents such as the Aum Shinrikyo subway attack in Tokyo spark understandable public concern and a flood of media attention, Barkun says. There is a growing fear that extremist groups will turn to chemical, biological, even nuclear weapons to get their points across. But Barkun's research shows good reason not to believe there is serious danger. "Other than Aum Shinrikyo, there's been no systematic use of weapons of mass destruction," he says. "It's one of these things that's gotten tremendously hyped not only by the media but also in certain law enforcement circles. If you actually look at the amount of damage such groups and individuals have produced, with the exception of the Oklahoma City bombing, it's been remarkably small."

Another issue garnering much press and public attention, Barkun says, is the "lone wolf," an individual acting on his own on the basis of certain beliefs, but not as a result of involvement in a particular organization. Law enforcement agencies can do little to stop someone like Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, since lone wolf extremists are generally difficult to detect before they act. Here too, Barkun says, research can help deflect some of the hype. "There's a lot of public awareness of this issue, but in a sense I think it's more than the problem justifies," he says. "When an incident does occur you tend to get panic reactions, which is true of terrorism generally. Because it's undertaken by people who are unknown or obscure, the feeling is that there may be more of them out there than there really are."

Spencer hopes his research provides a better understanding of how extremists work. In studying such people, he says, one can gain insight into the workings of mainstream society. "Because these groups' interactions are so exaggerated, it makes available to you the more general interactions that happen on a day-to-day basis in the everyday world, which are so taken for granted that we don't notice them," Spencer says. "The social processes really aren't all that different. It's a matter of degree. These extremes of bigotry and hatred, a belief in a threat to your value system—those are things all human communities in one way or another have to deal with."

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A police officer in protective gear responds to the 1995 Tokyo subway gas attack by Aum Shinrikyo.